

interview

mitch horowitz

THE OCCULT IS A VAST UMBRELLA FOR THE VESTIGES OF OUR ANCIENT SPIRITUALITY, PAGANISM, AND MYTHOLOGY, WHICH WERE ALMOST ENTIRELY ERADICATED BY CHRISTIANITY.

INTERVIEW BY BOBBI SALVÖR MENEZ
PORTRAIT BY ALEPH MOLINARI

MODERN OCCULTIST MITCH HOROWITZ EXPLORES WHY THESE HETEROGENEOUS SUBCULTURES ENDURE, PARTICULARLY IN THE UNITED STATES, SPREADING THROUGH LITERATURE, CINEMA, AND POP CULTURE, AND INSPIRING NEW FORMS OF SPIRITUALITY.

artwork by laust højgaard

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LAUST HØJGAARD, *ADMIRER*, 2024, ACRYLIC AND PHOSPHORIC
ACRYLIC ON LINEN, 75 X 59 INCHES



BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — What was your relationship to magic and the occult when you were growing up, and did you have any formative experiences?

MITCH HOROWITZ — I grew up in Queens in the 1970s, at a time when we were feeling the shockwaves of the occult revival of the late '60s. Occult and esoteric material was available everywhere. My sister would come home from school with the paperbacks of Carlos Castañeda and books on Bigfoot, flying saucers, and extrasensory perception or ESP. Talk show hosts like Mike Douglas or Merv Griffin would be interviewing the Maharishi or an astrologer, or there'd be reruns of *The Twilight Zone* or *Dark Shadows*. I grew incredibly interested in where all this material came from and why it had endured. I remain fascinated with astrology and how an art that had its earliest stirrings in ancient Mesopotamia can still meaningfully reach us today. It's extraordinary that after centuries of the Dark Ages — which wiped out many ancient spiritual and magical practices in Persia, North Africa, Egypt, Greece, and Rome — we retain a conception of astrology that, despite changes in the Earth's vantage point, is not totally different from that of our ancestors.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — And how has this appreciation of astrology and the occult evolved for you?

MITCH HOROWITZ — It's incredible that through all of Western history, this material lingers because many things have not endured from earlier eras: laws, religious precepts, and all kinds of customs that we no longer abide. Today, people experiment with these things outside of any formal faith. As a kid, I used to borrow books on folklore and superstition from our local public library, and I recall taking out a book on Pennsylvania-Dutch folklore. Inside appeared a pentagram with phrases written around it, supposed to function as a fortune-telling device. The idea was to close your eyes, hover a pin above the pentagram, then bring it down on your fortune. I did so and got "a letter." At age nine, I received few letters. The next day, one arrived: an overdue book notice from the library. So, you get these green lights along the way. In adulthood, I became editor-in-chief of a New Age imprint at Penguin Random House, and I started to feel that the history of these topics and the figures involved weren't being handled well. That gave birth to my first book, *Occult America*, in 2009. It grew from a marriage of passion for the subject and the wish to document it.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Why do you see the occult as a specifically Western phenomenon?

MITCH HOROWITZ — The West has a peculiar religious history. For literally millennia, those areas historically considered the West — essentially the territories occupied by Alexander the Great — were steeped in esoteric, nature-based polytheism. With the advent of Christianity and later Islam, the monotheistic faiths grew overwhelmingly dominant. The ancient forms were largely wiped out, at least in above-ground culture. When Renaissance era translators, scholars, and clerics began rediscovering primeval traditions, they called them by the Latin term *occultus*, for "secret" or "hidden." "Occult" became the umbrella term for our antique spirituality, which persists in fragmentary retentions and adaptations. In that sense, I call occultism a revivalist movement. Other spiritualities — such as Vedism, Buddhism, and Taoism — possess an esoteric core of their own. But those faiths are continuous; in the West, our spiritual story is schismatic.

The occult is, in effect, our unseen religious history.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — How has the occult taken root in the United States specifically? Can you trace its history?

MITCH HOROWITZ — This is the grand irony of American history. In the midst of slavery and the destruction of Native American civilization, the colonies were, in fact, a safe harbor for religious heterodoxy. Even in the colonial era,

there existed a fair degree of religious liberty. William Penn came from a wealthy Quaker family that experienced discrimination in England. Penn founded Philadelphia — "the city of brotherly love" — as a reserve of religious tolerance, at least by the standards of the day. Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom became our First Amendment. Across the Atlantic, seekers heard about this activity. Central Europe, in particular, had been a hub of late-Renaissance occultism and was later decimated by the Thirty Years' War, which was partly a backlash against religious experimentalism. Some seekers and reformers fled that environment for the colonies, bringing with them interests in Hermeticism, alchemy, astrology, number symbolism, and sometimes *magick*. Seeds of religious radicalism took root early in the nation.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Would you say there are singular characteristics to American occultism?

MITCH HOROWITZ — I would say the distinguishing traits are civic equality and transparency. American occultism gave rise to the first public female religious leadership in the modern West. You find that, for example, in the life of a Revolutionary War era medium who called herself the Public Universal Friend. The Friend was born in Rhode Island as Jemima Wilkinson but later claimed a new identity as an avatar of extraphysical intelligence. The Friend was among the only figures able to cross between battlelines during the war. For most people, the Friend's supernatural claims were less shocking than seeing a woman deliver sermons in public. The Spiritualist movement of the mid-19th century, with its seances and metaphysical clubs, was overwhelmingly led by female mediums. The first Black-led abolitionist movement in the colonies emerged from African Lodge No. 1, the world's first Black Masonic lodge, which continues as Prince Hall Freemasonry. Hand in hand with a sense of social equity was the wish to publicize occult practices, later expressed through mail-order courses, how-to guides, magazines, and pamphlets. Much of America's occult sought to evangelize rather than huddle within lodge rooms or secret societies. An element of drama and secrecy persisted, but the pronounced impulse was to shout it from the rooftops. This differed from Europe, where occultism was more initiatory, ritualistic, and secretive.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Why do you think practitioners of the occult and magic have been persecuted for so long?

MITCH HOROWITZ — Occultism has its unique problems, such as being on the losing side of a religious struggle in late antiquity. But persecutions are general to the human story. The history of religions can be written in condemnation. Even today, one sees retention of orthodoxy within the alternative spiritual culture — exactly where seekers go to flee it. As soon as someone has an experience or undergoes something to which they groove, they want to protect it, rules start getting cemented, and rules eventually become walls.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — And in this lifetime of curiosity for the occult, were there particular teachers or guides who were important in your earlier studies?

MITCH HOROWITZ — I would say that my most important teacher was a man named Jon Rothenberg, who was dedicated to the ideas of the Greek-Armenian spiritual philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff, whom I consider one of the most important figures of the 20th century. I'm also interested in Neville Goddard, a British-Barbadian mystic who died in 1972. Neville's teachings are a form of extreme idealism that posits how everything you experience, including my words right now, is the product of your own psyche, your own mental pictures and emotionalized thoughts. It's a radical proposition for which Neville argues impeccably. At one point, I thought that this is ridiculous, and I'm just losing myself in an imaginary zone, that this is too wild a gambit. But the teacher I mentioned told me, "Well, try it." That was all I needed to keep going.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — I love hearing about this encouragement to follow your curiosity, wherever it may take



you in your search. I like the term "believing historian," which is how you describe yourself. What makes you *believe*, and what is the apparatus for assessing what is true or real for you?

MITCH HOROWITZ — First, whatever ethical, therapeutic, or spiritual practice a person is dedicated to must produce a tangible result. This result can vary with the individual's needs. People often talk about seeking happiness, and I applaud that. But the idea of seeking happiness is not infrequently treated as an untutored notion within esoteric circles. Colleagues may say, "There are different egos inside of you — which one of them is asking for happiness?" I reject that. I think that the sensitive individual is capable of defining happiness for themselves, as a child does.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Have you had any direct experiences with the uncanny and the paranormal?

MITCH HOROWITZ — I haven't had much in the way of what might be called paranormal experiences. I've had experiences that could be called uncanny, where you see possibilities in human situations that might not otherwise be evident and that go beyond the words used to describe them. Gurdjieff believed that unflinching perseverance will deliver you, and I've had experiences where Gurdjieff's statement held true. He said this in a very particular way. Sometimes, in strange ways — ways not so linear — I've found an object or solution that I absolutely needed in the unlikelyst of places at the unlikelyst hour. It's quantifiable in no way whatsoever; no actuarial table could capture the odds. I'm also interested in occurrences that are demonstrably quantifiable by stats. Extrasensory perception, precognition, and telepathy are areas in which I've grown profoundly interested because they *can* be quantified. Replicable stats from academic ESP research can be married to testimony and experiences that seekers have reported for millennia.

When you reach that place, you start to feel warranted belief in the unseen world.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — And how are these occult practices present in your life?

MITCH HOROWITZ — Well, I have a pastiche of practices. I'm not formally part of Gurdjieff's work today — but it remains with you. It gets in your bones. I sit in Transcendental Meditation, which is a mantra-based form of meditation that I find powerful. I'm hugely interested in psychic abilities, not only extrasensory perception and clairvoyance but also mind causation, or what in popular culture is sometimes called manifestation or the law of attraction. I avoid the term "law of attraction" because the implication is that life is subject to one mental super law — and I do not believe that. I think we live under a complexity of laws and forces. And all of them — like natural laws in general — are mitigated by surrounding conditions.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Is there a practice of the occult that you find most compelling for you right now?

MITCH HOROWITZ — I believe we've seen enough evidence, especially over the past 150 years, to warrant that there's something selective about perspective. I'm also interested in precognition and retrocausality, which is a fairly new term. In 2011, a clinical psychologist at Cornell, Daryl J. Bem, published the results of 10 years of lab experiments in precognition. In brief, Bem found that if you study for a test in the future, it elevates your score in the present. It runs completely contrary to everything we're raised to understand. And yet, is it so contrary? Einstein's theories, which are now proven, dictate that time is nonlinear. Time bends in certain conditions, specifically under extreme velocity and extreme gravity, like a black hole. Astronauts, while they're moving nowhere near the velocity of light, actually do experience minute yet measurable reductions in the aging process. It's surreal, yet there it is. We can't wrap our minds around relativity, but it's actual. Bem's experiments — which have been validated in a meta-analysis of 90 trials in 33 labs in 14 nations — comport not only with relativity but also with interpretations of quantum physics.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Do you see a convergence between magic and modern scientific research?

MITCH HOROWITZ — We have to accept that in the 21st century, we are going to encounter scientific paradoxes and natural phenomena that don't seem to meet up with discoveries because there may exist a bigger umbrella than the one we think we live under. Quantum physics almost logically dictates that we must accept the existence of many worlds, different intersections of time that are determined to a degree by perception and measurement. And what are our senses other than means of perception and measurement?

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — I'm curious about whether you consider scientists to be new agents of the occult, as emerging scientific research affirms or elaborates on ancient theories of the occult. Where do those lines end and begin for you?

MITCH HOROWITZ — In our society, we've been trained to use the term "science" as a synonym for reason and rationality. But we must be careful with that because science is *methodological replication*. If I can make water boil twice, I've learned something. That's the scientific method. I can't just use the term "science" in a political fashion to validate things I like or dislike. The important thing is: is the process replicable?





LAUST HØJGAARD, *CHASING MENACE*, 2024,
ACRYLIC ON LINEN, 78 1/2 X 118 INCHES



LAUST HØJGAARD, *BROTHER BIRD*, 2024,
ACRYLIC AND PHOSPHORIC ACRYLIC ON LINEN,
31 1/2 X 31 1/2 INCHES

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Now science is exploring the extraphysicality of reality.

MITCH HOROWITZ — What's occurring in science today is extraordinary. It builds our sense of the extraphysical, of the non-logical.

Years ago, when people would talk about the metaphysical interpretation of quantum theory, as I've been doing, skeptics would say we were cherry-picking material and using it to justify magic. That critique has quieted down because theorists and quantum physicists are now debating this material in ways that are even more far out than what I'm suggesting. I think the rejectionist skeptics have painted themselves into a corner. I find wonderful opportunities for discussing extraphysicality with engineers, doctors, and computer scientists. The ones who complain are usually in the social sciences or humanities because they have a cultural position that frames modernist thought as exclusively physicalist. Modernist thought, as I understand it, seeks antecedents or underlying causes for phenomena. It's a gap in the modernist viewpoint if spirituality or extraphysicality is, somehow by nature, considered delusive. That's unsupportable.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — You speak about occultism as a revivalist movement of knowledge previously suppressed by different forms of power. What does it mean to consider a revival of the occult toward new possible futures?

MITCH HOROWITZ — My greatest fear for the future of our culture is the degree to which everybody is so angry. It's like a disabling fog. I don't fully understand this anger.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — I'm reminded of this description of anger as a lazy form of grief, a self-harming act that's the result of an untended need.

MITCH HOROWITZ — We must take these hidden tendrils of life seriously. In Vedic tradition, it's called karma. There are hidden tendrils of existence, and they're compensatory and real. So, maybe a small fraction of us could get down with that idea and start to note our behavior. Maybe it would help.

BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ — Can occult practices be a way of changing conceptions of the self?

MITCH HOROWITZ — That's what it has meant for me. That is part of why I call myself a "believing historian." Humanity — and even pre-humanity in the form of our Neanderthal ancestors — has been making "deals" with its conception of unseen forces for as long as known history. I believe occult philosophy helps the individual acknowledge this core of human nature and thereby ask with meaning, "Who am I?"

END